

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 393 142

CS 509 228

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TITLE Teaching Social Construction of Reality in the Basic Course: Opening Minds and Integrating Units.
PUB DATE Nov 95
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (81st, San Antonio, TX, November 18-21, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Course Content; Course Objectives; Higher Education; Instructional Improvement; *Interpersonal Communication; *Introductory Courses; *Program Improvement; *Public Speaking; Self Concept; Social Cognition
IDENTIFIERS *Small Group Communication; *Social Construction of Reality

ABSTRACT

This paper, after a brief review of social construction theory and its application to identity, emotions, and relationships, explores the introduction of social construction of reality into the basic communication course. It offers the broad based theoretical perspective as a way to open the minds of entering college students and to integrate the sometimes disparate units of the basic course. The paper discusses the uses of social construction of reality as a foundation for teaching students about communication processes. Specifically, the paper offers ways to introduce the theory and tie it to various foundational concepts: communication models; perception; attribution; self-concept; etc. It then considers how the areas of interpersonal communication, small group communication, and public communication (public speaking) become different contexts for constructing and sharing social realities. Contains 11 references. (Author/CR)

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Teaching social construction of reality in the basic
course:

Opening minds and integrating units

by

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Social construction in the basic course

Abstract

This paper, after a brief review of social construction theory and its application to identity, emotions, and relationships, explores the introduction of social construction of reality into the basic course. It offers the broad based theoretical perspective as a way to open the minds of entering college students and to integrate the sometimes disparate units of the basic course.

The paper discusses the use of social construction of reality as a foundation for teaching students about communication processes. Specifically, the paper offers ways to introduce the theory and tie it to various foundational concepts (communication models, perception, attribution, self-concept etc.). The paper then considers how the areas of interpersonal communication, small group communication and public communication become different contexts for constructing and sharing social realities.

Teaching social construction of reality in the basic
course:

Opening minds and integrating units

Social construction of reality is such a broad based theory that it approaches a philosophical view. While I choose not to debate the finer distinctions between theoretical perspectives and philosophical views, I do propose social constructionism as a proper foundation for opening the minds of our students to new ways of thinking and acceptance of others' perspectives. Social construction is also an excellent pedagogical tool for connecting the sometimes disparate units within the hybrid basic communication course.

The theory

Social construction of reality is a theory which assumes that the "objective" reality which each of us lives in is a social construction; and that language and conversation are the primary tools of construction. The theory does not necessarily deny the existence of some kind of objective reality. However, since we are, inherently, subjective creatures, we have no direct access to that objective reality. Therefore, our

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understanding of the world is gained through perceptual filters formed by socialization. Our language is a large part of that socialization and forms and reforms the categories by which we classify phenomena we encounter and the symbols by which we give meaning to our experiences, including our experience of ourselves and our relationships.

Berger and Luckman (1966) talk about this extensively in terms of everyday life and the common sense knowledge that seems to be available to most people. They emphasize the importance of language and talk in the creation, modification and maintenance of everyday reality: "Everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellowman [sic]" (p. 35). Language is the tool for socializing the child (primary socialization) and the adult into new subcultures (secondary socialization) (p. 121), the tool for understanding ourselves (as we receive information about ourselves from others and crystallize and stabilize our own reality in talk) (p. 36); the tool to attain shared definitions and understanding with others (p. 120); and the tool for realizing, apprehending and producing, the world (p. 141). Their perspective centralizes communication as the process which creates, modifies and maintains reality. Littlejohn (1992) states that "our meanings and understandings arise from our

communication with others" (p. 190).

Gergen (1985) further explicates the assumptions of the social constructionist movement in psychology:

1. "What we take to be the experience of the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which the world is understood" (p. 266). With this statement, social constructionists reject positivistic ideas about how knowledge is acquired. When our view of the world is influenced by our cultural beliefs and our language, how can we profess to objectively studying the world? What we study, how we interpret what we "see" is, in some part, biased by perceptual filters. This first assumption essentially negates any true observation of "objective" reality since we have no direct (unbiased by language or other perceptual filters) access to it. The first assumption also incorporates the Sapir Whorf hypothesis regarding the influence of language and language categories on our perceptions of events.

2. "The terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people" (p. 267). The second assumption reminds us that language is contextually (and historically) situated and, thus, is ever changing according to situational factors.

3. "The degree to which a given form of understanding

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prevails or is sustained across time is not fundamentally dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes" (p. 268). This assumption discusses the intersubjective nature of knowledge. As ideas are discussed and evaluated they may ascend or descend dependent on the power of the rhetoric employed. How well the idea may explain a given phenomena is irrelevant if the person(s) advocating the idea cannot convey their arguments as convincingly as someone opposing the idea. Thus, entire philosophies and theories (for instance, Freudian psychology) maybe accepted as "truth" at one point and discarded at a later date.

4. "Forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are integrally connected with many other activities in which people engage" (p. 268). The fourth assumption states that reality is "constructed" by patterns of communication, not just interpreted. In short, what is done, how it gets done, our priorities, our values, indeed, our beliefs about how the world works and how social interactions work are socially constructed through our interactions with others in repeated patterns of behavior. Since we "believe" certain social interactions should work in given ways, we make this so by our behavior.

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Many aspects of human behavior and cognition have been explored and researched from the social constructionist perspective. I will briefly explore only three: identity, emotions and relationships, since they are relevant to the hybrid basic course.

Identity

Berger and Luckman (1966) term the formation of self-concept primary socialization; when a child comes to understand the world and eventually him/herself through the twin perceptual filters of the social group and the family within which the child is raised. They posit that this is not only a cognitive experience but that the emotional bonds the child feels allows the child to identify with the parents, the family and, eventually, the social group and, thus, come to his/her own identity within this shared reality.

It is important to remember that our concept of self depends on the language we use to understand self. Our identities depend on the theory(ies) we ascribe to (trait theories, role theories) and the social practices we use (Parrish-Sprowl, 1993). For instance, collectivist cultures are more likely to view themselves as members of a particular group rather than as the unique individuals we perceive in Western cultures. As Gergen said:

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To construct persons in such a way that they possess inherent sin is to invite certain lines of action and not others. Or to treat depression, anxiety, or fear as emotions from which people involuntarily suffer is to have far different implications than to treat them as chosen, selected, or played out as on a stage (1985, p. 268).

Basic communication course textbooks discuss the social construction of self-concept in terms of reflected appraisal (Adler & Rodman, 1995; Verderber, 1993) . Later changes in self-concept occur due to secondary socialization (identifying oneself within a particular subculture such as a school or organization). The individual acquires specific role knowledge during this process.

Emotions

Emotions are also considered social constructions. Scholars recognize the physiological component of emotions (Harre, 1986; Littlejohn, 1992) but posit that the labeling or interpretation of that bodily feeling is a socially constructed and learned behavior. We interpret the physiological reaction; we don't identify or discover what emotion we are feeling. Our interpretation depends on the socially constructed rights, duties, obligations and conventions of evaluation as well as the

situationally relevant prescription and proscription of emotions (Harre, 1986, p. 8). Otherwise, we "feel" something and then we interpret this feeling as an emotion depending on what our reality says is expected or prescribed given the situation. The validity of this approach is seen in the inability of people to describe different physiological components for dissimilar emotions.

Relationships

Duck and Pond (1989) believe that talk and the characteristics of a relationship cannot be split apart, that there is a type of synecdochical relationship between the two wherein one contains the other and is contained by the other. According to these two authors, "not only do relationship definitions . . . affect or influence talk, but also talk defines the relationship, . . ." (p 26). This attitude is in accordance with the ideas of social construction. In this instance, the relationship is defined, changed, negotiated and created through communication. It is a purely social construction in that without some form of communication the relationship ceases to exist.

Dixson (1995) discusses the socialization of children about relationships, positing that children learn how relationships work from their parents. Children develop

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"models" for relationships which are altered in later life by interactions with significant others (peers, teachers) as well as through the media and observation of others' relational behavior. These models represent children's reality of relationships and guide their behavior in relationships.

As this brief literature review shows, social construction is a theory with many applications to the hybrid basic communication course. The rest of this discussion will explore ways of introducing the theory to undergraduates, argue that this theory has the capability of opening minds to new ideas and viewpoints, and attempt to show how it can be integrated into and integrate the sometimes self-contained units of communication processes, interpersonal communication, group communication and public speaking.

Using social construction in the basic course:

a new look at some old ideas

Introducing social construction of reality

While most entering college students are unfamiliar with the theory of social construction, they are familiar with many of its tenets. For instance, I would predict that most college students would accept that:

1. Our access to the the world is through our interpretations of our experiences (everyone sees things differently).

2. Our interpretations of our experiences are biased by past experience (If we have bad luck with Chevys, we interpret Chevys as a poor choice for a new car).

3. Our past experience or training includes our language, our culture and our family of origin, among other things.

If they accept these statements, they should accept their logical conclusion:

Therefore, 4. Our access to the world is biased by our language, our culture and our family background.

This is one of the major tenets of social constructionism. To carry things a bit further:

1. Because we view the world in certain ways, we act as if this "reality" is true (we sometimes forget there are other interpretations, plus we have little choice since we have to act on what we "know.").

2. Acting as if this reality were true can "make" it true (self-fulfilling prophecy).

This leads to a second major tenet of social constructionism:

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3. *Our behavior (including and especially talk) maintains what we have been taught through past experience, modifies the world to fit our reality, and creates a world consistent with our reality.*

The logic involved in reaching the first major tenet depends on a discussion of the transactional model of communication, the processes of perception, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and the formation of self-concept. The validity of this logic is improved with discussions of cultural, gender and familial differences leading to differences in beliefs, behavior and expectations.

The logic in the second tenet involves the discussion of self-fulfilling prophecies, perceptual and attributional biases, and logical fallacies as well as some conversation about how cultural traditions and beliefs are maintained, changed and created.

So, with an indepth exploration of the two major tenets of social constructionism, students gain a solid understanding of communication and how it functions to form their self-concepts and their reality. Just as importantly, they should be able to have a more intimate understanding of the very real differences that exist between people of different cultures and subcultures. When they can "see" why such differences exist,

students can examine the possibilities that while other cultures/subcultures are different, different does not equal "bad" or "wrong."

The instructor of the basic course should not be on a mission to create politically correct thinking. He/she should, however, be on mission to encourage thinking, especially thinking which allows the possibility that other perspectives are worth exploring.

After this foundation in social construction and communication, the class can then explore how realities, once formed, become shared realities and/or modified realities within the contexts of interpersonal relationships, group experiences and public speaking addresses.

Social construction in interpersonal relationships

The notion of shared realities and constructing joint realities within personal relationships has been explored by scholars of personal relationships (Duck, 1990; Dixon, 1995) and family communication (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, Bochner, 1995). Forming relationships with others is a process of codefining reality (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, Bochner, 1995), figuring out what things mean within the context of this relationship, defining what this relationship is, in short, co-constructing meanings/interpretations of messages. Students

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relate to this when symbols for types of relationships are discussed such as rings, roses, introductions to the family, self-disclosure of more intimate details, pet names and ways of behaving that have unique meanings within a particular relationship. Students can also see from experience how persons outside the relationship play a role in defining the relationship as best friends, just dating, a couple etc.

A discussion of how we can redefine relationships and literally talk ourselves out of relationships is useful as is a discussion of interpretation of emotions and attribution of behaviors. Within this context we are not introducing new "rules" about social construction, just adding to our understanding by expanding the contexts of the processes of social construction. Having students compare their definitions for such relational concepts as married, engaged, going together, dating, girlfriend/wife/mother, boyfriend/husband/father can open eyes as to why relationships can fail given the different realities and expectations that individuals carry into relationships. In short, their "realities" about these relational roles may conflict with their partners' realities.

An exploration of the effects of relational history (family relationships, past friendships, romantic relationships,

work relationships) can allow students to uncover the kinds of baggage they may be carrying around and how that affects their present and future relational partners.

Gender and cultural differences are important components of understanding the difficulty of creating a shared relational reality from two individual's social constructions. The reasoning behind various types of conflict behavior and conflict management strategies is something students should be able to explicate given knowledge of social constructionism.

Social construction in small groups

Small group communication is an area enriched by an understanding of social constructionism. The development of leadership, group norms, and group decisions are all processes wherein individuals try to merge their realities into some kind of whole in order to function as a group rather than as several individuals. Codefining reality within small groups is just an extension of the ideas introduced during discussion of interpersonal relationships. Traditional group concepts such as cohesiveness, groupthink, and group identity become much simpler to comprehend and are instilled with more meaning than "getting along," "peer pressure," and "being one of the boys." Discussion can move from what the steps are in

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Dewey's Reflective Model of Problem Solving to how these steps might help groups construct a reality about a problem that allows them to reach consensus about a solution, even when they initially disagree.

Even the tedious list of group roles can take on new life as students consider how each role is a social construction and can contribute to the creation of a shared group reality.

To allow the students the opportunity to experience group construction of reality, team learning approaches, which have been successfully used in the basic course (Barone, J., personal communication, October 9, 1995), may be ideal. Students work in the same group all semester on various learning projects. By midsemester, students should be able to start analyzing and evaluating group norms, themes, conflict resolution strategies, identity and roles being socially constructed within their groups.

Social construction and public speaking

Public speaking is often interpreted and occasionally taught as a set of skills necessary to keep from making a fool of yourself. The students' attention is riveted on themselves as the speakers in front of the audience. Their concerns are with self-images and grades. Social construction moves the focus from the speaker to the connection between the speaker

and the audience. The speaker needs to construct a shared reality with the audience about the topic of the speech.

The advantage of this shift in focus means that the student has to consider the audience in developing the topic, choosing supporting arguments, considering delivery, choosing an organizational method and determining an effective presentational style. Of course, texts and instructors already teach this idea. Social constructionism simply helps to emphasize and centralize the connection between speaker and audience. The theory allows for both the integration of public speaking with group communication and interpersonal communication since, once again, we are extending the same concepts to a slightly different context but attempting to accomplish the same goals. The unit of public speaking itself can also become more integrated (if it was not already audience or audience-speaker) focused in tying all of the skills and concepts presented to the creation of this shared reality. The speech then becomes a way to invite or persuade the audience to share the reality of the speaker or to coconstruct a reality with the speaker, rather than something delivered by the speaker at the audience!

Social construction and the basic course

Given the "fit" between this theory and the content of

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the basic communication course, I believe it offers an excellent opportunity for enhancing students' communication knowledge, awareness and understanding.

Since some tenets of the theory will probably raise some objections with students, I propose an active learning approach. Rather than "teaching the theory," let students build the theory. Given a certain idea or theoretical tenet, let students search out "proof" from their texts and their experiences to support or contradict the idea. The instructor's role is to guide this search by suggesting types of experiences and/or text chapters which are likely to contain relevant information.

By the end of the semester, an appropriate final test or essay assignment could allow students to synthesize what they know by asking them to write an argument accepting/rejecting all/some of the theory in general or in any of the contexts they have studied. They could also expand their thinking to look at how organizations or the media help socially construct realities.

Conclusion

I realize this is an extremely brief overview of the incorporation of social construction into the basic course. I do

not believe I propose a radical transformation of the basic communication course. The content of the hybrid course remains essential unchanged. Social constructionism offers a framework which can integrate the areas of the course for students in ways not adequately done by many textbooks and some instructors. More importantly, social constructionism offers a theoretical perspective which forces students to consider shades and tints rather than blacks and whites. If knowledge is essentially based in interpretation, then there exist few "truths." Therefore, uncritical acceptance of ideas is intolerable. Any and all ideas (when important enough to warrant such scrutiny) should be accepted only after critical analysis, for an idea is one representation of reality; other, equally valid, representations may exist.

Are we, then, asking our students to question the basic values, beliefs and assumptions by which they order their lives? Absolutely. We do not ask them to reject or accept a particular perspective, but always to question before accepting or rejecting. Students who do this are, by definition, more open minded, better critical thinkers, better consumers and better voters in a democratic society.

Can one theoretical perspective do all this in a one semester course? Probably not for everyone, but even if we

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only reach some

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